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ABSTRACT

Parent participation in the education of their disadvantaged children at Buffalo (New York) Public School 37 resulted in the development of an effective reading program. Desired competencies were delineated; carefully paced and sequenced teaching plans were prepared; and criterion referenced tests were used to measure the levels of mastery of each student. Between the 1975-76 and 1977-78 school years the number of kindergarten through grade 6 students reading at grade level increased by 53 percent. At the end of the 1979-80 school year--the second year in which the program was completely operational--more than 60 percent of the students read at or above their prescribed grade level. In the fall of 1980, the school was converted to a magnet school, and School 37 became known as Futures Academy. In 1983, 82 percent of third-grade students and 85 percent of sixth-grade students were reading at or above state reference points. In addition to mastery learning, particular components which made the program work included the quality of the teaching staff, close and positive parent-school relationships, and an effective learning-oriented student management system which relieved teachers of record-keeping and parent report responsibilities. In sum, Public School 37 evinced the primary requisites for effective schools that are attended by children usually written off as failures. (RH)

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EFFECTIVE TEACHING IS NOT JUST A DREAM

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Just because you are black, live in a project, are poor, or have just one parent doesn't mean you can't read. Fortunately for a number of children in the Buffalo Public School 37, this was the philosophy adopted by the school board, staff and parents. It was a philosophy which paid off, not only in increased achievement scores in reading but also in parental involvement, community pride, teacher satisfaction and national recognition of Excellence in Education by the U. S. Department of Education.

How this all came about is a story, Mrs. Sybil Peterson, the teacher, coordinator and impetus for the program, is anxious to tell.

Public School 37, like many other schools in this country, was an inner-city school pointed to as inferior because it was filled with "disadvantaged" youngsters whom many people believed were unable to learn. Like other schools, Title I monies, special attention, special reading programs were all used and thought to be the "answer". In spite of the tremendous amount of money, "experimental programs", the desegregation decree, and other efforts, little or no change occurred in the reading achievement performance of the students. During the 1972-73 school year, Public School 37 had the dubious distinction of having the lowest achievement scores on the required performance measures used by the State of New York of any school in the city. Staff morale was low, parents were distraught, and students were thoroughly convinced of their inferiority. It was obvious that something needed to be done and some change had to occur.

Together with parents, Mrs. Peterson and other members of the staff sat down to first review the reading program. After all, reading is the basic skill endemic to success in all subjects. The parents, unlike the stereotype picture often painted of them, while low in

income, were adamant in their interest in their children and in their demands that the school become responsible and effective for their children's educational performance. More important, they demanded a closer working relationship with the school which kept them abreast of the student's performance rather than calling them in to discuss the failure. As a result of this interaction, a reading program was developed--TRAMPS, an acronym for Teaching Reading and Measuring Progress Systemically.

The idea behind the program seems closely aligned with Bloom's concept of Mastery learning. The desired outcomes or competencies were delinated, carefully paced and sequenced teaching plans were prepared to teach the competencies and skills desired, and criterion referenced tests were used to measure the levels of mastery of each student. By the 1977-78 school year the program was in total operation having been tested and corrected and the results, as seen in Figure 1, were phenomenal. Between the 75-76 and 77-78 school years, the performance level of the school rose from having only 2% of the population in grades K-6 reading at grade level to having over 55% reading at grade level. The number continued to climb so that at the end of the 79-80 school year, in a school previously written off as a failure and on the verge of closing, more than 60% of the students read at or above their prescribed grade level.

A more positive self-esteem permeated the K-6 grade youngsters, the number of referrals for placement in special education classes deminished and teachers and staff felt that their teaching was more rewarding. The parents were overjoyed and were now able to protest the closing of the school with anewed fervor. The steady growth in reading so impressed the Buffalo Board of Education that they considered

the TRAMPS Reading Program the strong component that would attract majority students to an all black school.

In the fall of 1980, the school was converted to a magnet school and School 37 became known as Futures Academy. As noted in Figure 2, a decline was registered in the performance of grades 3 and 6 students as measured by the New York State Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP). Additional support staff was added to help overcome the lag of the new student body, 27% of whom were majority, and scores climbed steadily. In 1983, 82% of grade 3 and 85% of grade 6 students were reading at or above the state reference point. By now the school boasts a 48% majority and 52% minority population of over 800 students and was turning students away or placing them on a waiting list.

What are the particular components, in addition to mastery learning which makes the program continue to work in spite of the transiency of the neighborhood and the increased level of poverty and social problems. When Mrs. Peterson looked at this question, she identified these significant factors.

First, the success of the program depends heavily on the quality of the teachers involved. Teachers who do well in this program tend to be experienced, warm and supportive of students, display and have high expectations for the students, and seem willing to be a part of the team and teach in the way which has found to be successful. In otherwords they are willing to follow the plan, rather than demanding the right to "do their own thing."

Finding teachers of this quality is not difficult but it must be done in a less than traditional manner. With the union's approval, teachers are selected by Mrs. Peterson and parents in an interview along with the principal of the school. If, however, the teacher

selected does not work out, teachers may be transferred from the school without a great deal of difficulty. The result is the development of a high quality of staff with a cadre of teachers who are willing to be "realistically accountable" for teaching the children of P. S. 37.

A second important factor and a concommitant factor with teaching is that a management system has been developed which insures that the students are carefully assessed, properly placed with the correct teacher, and the correct objectives and instructional materials are provided to meet the student's needs. Rather than burden the teacher with this massive paperwork, the work is done by Mrs. Peterson. This provides a coordinated approach to the diagnosis and assessment of each student, provides a central clearinghouse for parents to contact and ask questions, but most importantly, it relieves the teacher from the arduos tasks necessary to keep the program going so that the teacher can teach.

A third component of this program is the close, positive relationship which has been developed between the school and the parents of the children. Rather than ignoring, blaming, and stereotyping parents, the staff recognizes parental rights, parental interests, and parental influence. To maintain this relationship, each level of mastery obtained by the child is reported to the parent. Of most importance is that suggestions are made to the parent as to how these achievements can be rewarded and recognized at home. In other words, the parents are placed in the position of being positive reinforcers rather than punishers. The results are a most pleasant atmosphere in the home and the sense that the school and home are partners in an important venture.

The effectiveness of TRAMPS is not only an example of the viability of the mastery learning approach but is also evidence that the factors identified by Ron Edmonds of an effective school of the poor and minorities were not figments of his imagination. Public School 37 evinces the necessary team approach, high expectations, orderly and structured management, warm, encouraging and committed teachers and high quality teaching by trained staff. As Edmonds points out, these are the primary requisites for effective schools for children usually written off as failures.

The TRAMPS program is an example of what can occur when teachers adapt the educational practice of equality in educational outcomes rather than exacerbating individual differences. A maximum of time is given to teaching the task, teaching is done by teachers not support staff, and each task is carefully sequenced to insure all students progress through the same learning hierarchy, have the prerequisites to proceed, and are evaluated on what is taught, not on what is supposed. Most important, it assures that each student is taught in accordance to his/her own learning rate with time being allowed based upon student needs.

What then is the message. It would appear that in spite of educators desire to blame society, parents, innate abilities or other factors, the ability to influence the achievement of students is indeed in the hands of the school. It also would appear that educators already have at their disposal, the research, directions and tools which can help and direct their efforts to do the job. What is needed now is for school staffs to produce the action plans. Futures Academy is a good example that it can be done.

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Developmental Basal Reading Program Grades K-6

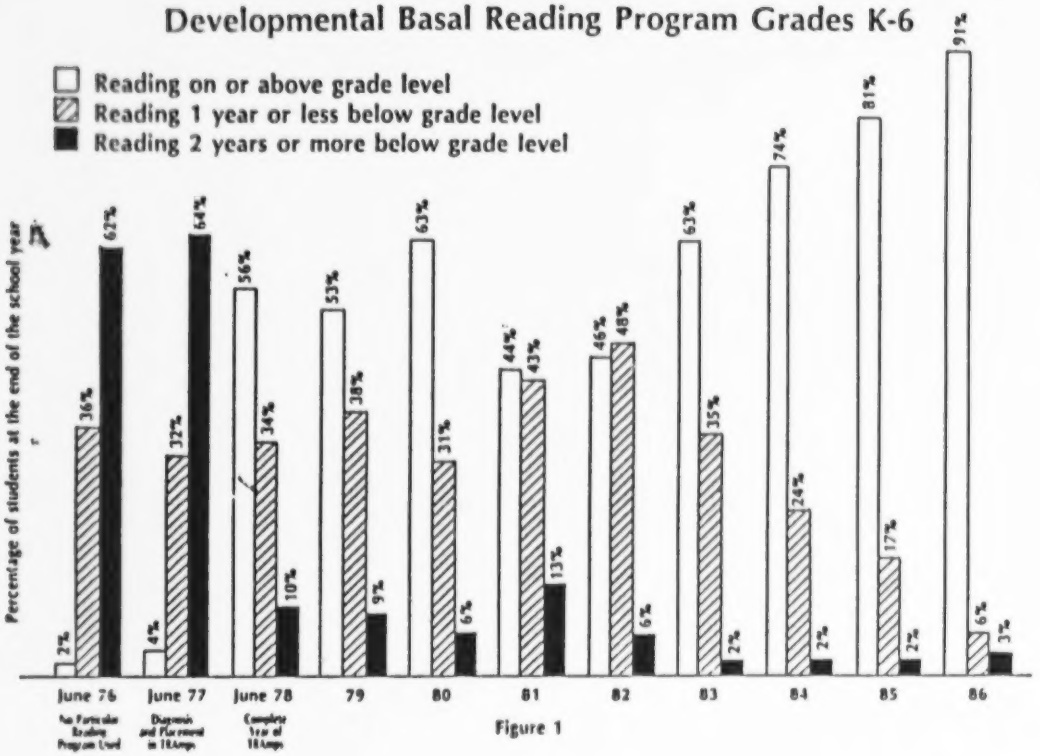
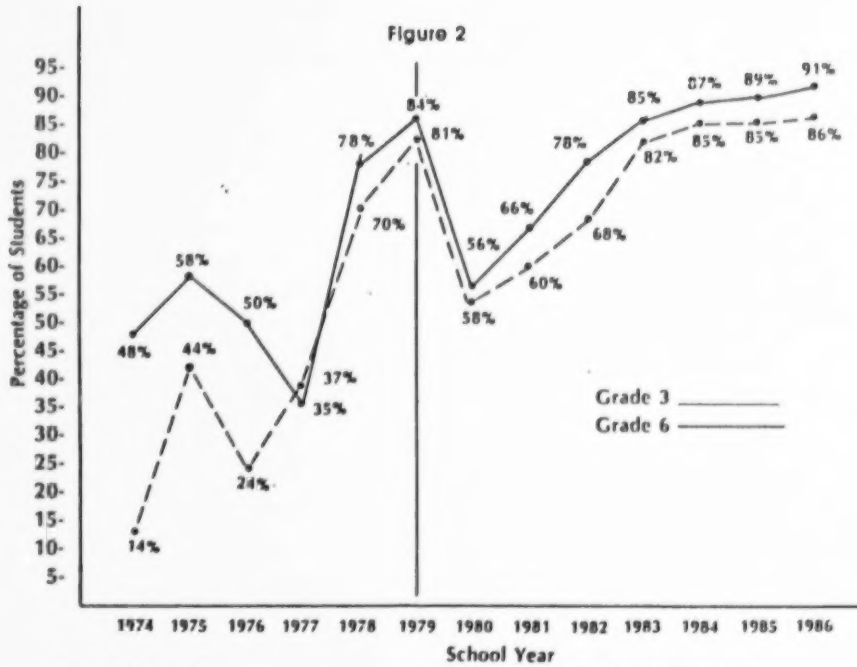


Figure 1

Figure 2



Pre-Integration

Percentage of Puplis in Grades 3 and 6 Who Obtained Total Scores In Reading Achievement Within Top Five Stanines On New York State Pupil Evaluation Program

Post Desegregation

Percentage of Puplis in Grades 3 and 6 Who Obtained Total Scores In Reading Achievement Within Top Five Stanines On New York State Pupil Evaluation Program

Achievement

Measured by Publisher's Norm

Percentage of Pupils in Grades 1-6 who obtained Total Scores in Reading Achievement within Top Five Stanines

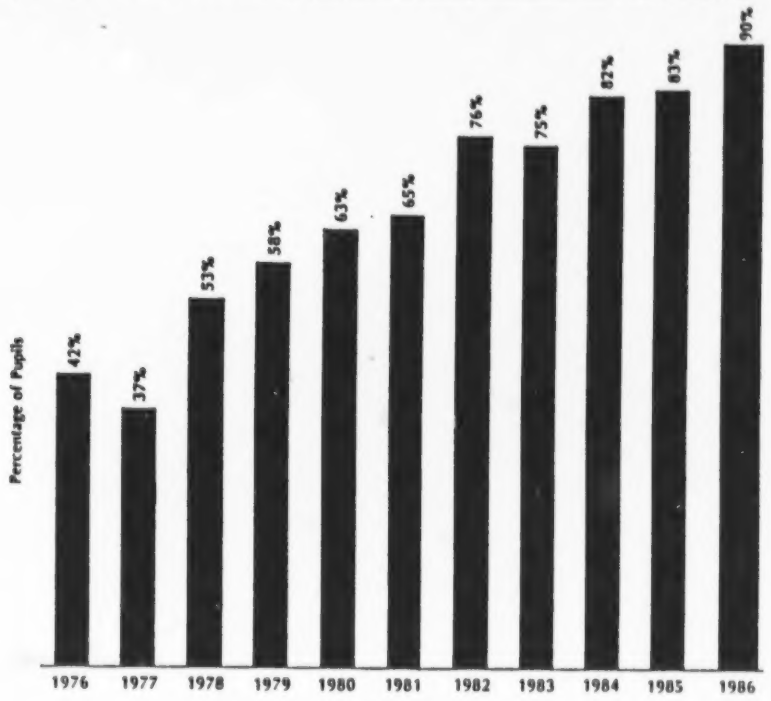


Figure 3